

# ACADEMIC CAREER IN THE MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: BECOMING A PROFESSOR

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## ABSTRACT

*The promotion to a full professor is the ultimate achievement in the career development of an academic. However, little has been written about the promotion process to a full professor. It has become a common understanding that the criteria for promotion in academic career centres primarily on teaching, research and service. However, due to the changing landscape of higher education shaped by the ease of mobility, internationalisation and emphasis on knowledge society, the promotion criteria has become more diverse and complex. This paper aims to explore the academic career, particularly the profile of a professor within the context of Malaysian higher education. Further, recognising that the higher education policy has an impact on the academic career, the discussion takes into consideration the strategic plan of the national higher education transformation and the guidelines for the tenure and promotion of two categories of professor: the professor and distinguished professor. This discussion is timely, as it will provide guidance for young academics to strategise their career planning in achieving the highest position in their career.*

**KEYWORDS:** *academic career, professor, distinguished professor, promotion guidelines, Malaysian higher education.*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Due to globalisation and development of information and communication technology, academics in higher education are facing changes which have resulted in a new set of values and changes in position, tasks and roles for academics (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009, Kwiek 2003). These changes include globalisation in teaching and research, a decrease in public funds for higher education, emphasis on privatization, managerialism, accountability and consumerism of higher education (Kwiek 2003). In a similar vein, Altbach *et.al* (2009)

claimed that academics are under stress as they need to respond to the demands of massification, the diversity of student population, the increase of private higher education institutions and the increasingly globalised academic labour market. They further anticipated that the academic profession will become more internationally oriented and mobile, and the roles of the academic profession will be diversified, specialised and subject to varied employment contracts. In this regard, there is a need to explore the changing roles of academics in relation to the changing landscape of higher education.

In an academic career, professor is the ultimate achievement for academics and a promotion to full professor is a very important step in the career development of an academic. Functioning within the changing context of higher education, the responsibilities of an academic are no longer confined within the boundaries of teaching, research and service (Altbach et al 2009, Boyer 1990). It is also shaped by the priorities of the specific institutions where they are working as well as the government. Thus, academics need to be familiar with the promotion criteria to strategise their career development to achieve the position of a full professor. However, little has been written about the process of promotion to a full professor.

This paper aims to explore the academic career, particularly the profile of a professor within the context of Malaysian higher education. Further, recognising that the higher education policy has an impact on the academic career, the discussion takes into consideration the strategic plan of the national higher education transformation and the guidelines for the tenure and promotion of two categories of professor: the professor and distinguished professor. This discussion is timely, as it will provide guidance for academics to strategise their career planning in achieving the highest position in their career. As such, this paper is organised in three main sections. The first section presents the global perspectives of an academic career, particularly the role of a professor as documented in the existing literature. The subsequent sections discuss the academic career in Malaysian higher education context, highlighting the distribution and profile and criteria for promotion of a professor and distinguished professor in Malaysia.

## **2.0 THE ROLE OF A PROFESSOR: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

In general, an academic career consists of five hierarchy levels, which are a tutor, lecturer, senior lecture, associate professor and full professor. Being positioned at the highest level, the role of a professor

encompasses all the responsibilities of its lower level. Taking this into consideration, the discussion in the section focuses on the roles and responsibilities of a professor.

The core responsibilities of an academic primarily involve teaching, research and service. However, the degree of responsibilities for each of these aspects tend to vary depending on the appointment of the academic. Altbach (2003) asserted that the role and description of a professor varies even within the same institution, as well as in a national context and across international boundaries.

Much of the discussion of the work of professor tend to focus on its role as academic leadership and scholarship. Referring to the American higher education, Boyer (1990) argued that the work of a professor can no longer be categorised according to the three criteria: teaching, research and service. He argued that the work of a professor must be redefined to reflect new realities, and he proposed that a professor should have four separate, yet overlapping functions of scholarship: discovery, integration, application and teaching.

Relating the higher education in the United Kingdom, Rayner *et.al* (2007) suggested that the role of a professor in the next few years will be subjected to considerable change in respond to the new managerialism resulting from the reform of public service. Based on a literature search, Rayner *et.al* (2010) summarised that the professors in the UK context, has among others:

- An identity, role and position that varies according to institution and in many contexts is associated with managerial positions;
- An appointment as a professor at the end of a career as an acknowledgment; and
- An honorary position usually associated with academic esteem.

They further identified the professor based on the nature of leadership which they characterised as collegiate leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, collective leadership, managerial leadership, remote/distance leadership and hybrid management leadership.

Further, based on a poll of fellow professors, Tight (2002 in McFarlene 2011) asserted that the professor holds a range of leadership and professional support activities connected with research and teaching

practice, mentoring, helping staff to develop, influencing the work and direction of the university, and representing the university in interfacing with wider communities. Drawn from Tight's (2002) characteristics of the professor, McFarlene (2011) conducted an investigation among professors in the UK. He described the role of a professor as intellectual leader who has the qualities of a(n) role model, mentor, guardian, advocate, acquirer and ambassador. McFarlene (2011) further argued that the new managerial and performative expectations are reshaping the role of professors, making it more diversified.

Focusing on the leadership experience of Malaysian women professors in their journey to reach their career positions, Maimunah and Roziah (2008) concluded that among the three-in-one functions of teaching, research and services, leadership roles at universities are very meaningful to an academic's career development. They also discussed the main characteristics of an academic profession, which include an expectation of a high level of competence, multiple academic responsibilities, a degree of independence in relation to academic freedom, intelligent career in academia and intellectual capital.

The discussion thus far, concentrates on the role of a professor specifically drawn from the global perspectives. Professors, in general are expected to demonstrate academic leadership, scholarship and intellectual leaders. Recognising that the academic career is dependent on the context in which the academic functions, the discussion in the subsequent section focuses on the context of higher education in Malaysia where the academic career is contextualised.

### **3.0 THE MALAYSIAN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION**

The landscape of Malaysian higher education is structured by four types of higher education providers, namely the public universities, private universities, polytechnics and community colleges. As of 2012, there are 20 public universities, 46 private universities, 30 polytechnics and 80 community colleges (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, official portal, 2012). Each type of the higher education providers serve specific needs to the development of the nation. Specifically, both the public and private universities provide the undergraduate, graduate and post graduate levels, of education. The polytechnics provide technical education and vocational training (TEVT). While the community colleges provide life-long learning education by offering short courses for the communities within its vicinity.

The Malaysian higher education is framed within the national higher education policy that has three main agendas, which are establishing a world class university system in Malaysia; making Malaysia a regional education hub; and transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy (Regel *et.al.*, 2007, p. 26). These policy agendas can be viewed as responses from the government in meeting the challenges of the changing emphasis of global higher education. To achieve these agendas, a strategic plan to transform the national higher education has been initiated in 2006 and it is now in its second phase. While the first phase focuses on the setting up the framework, the second phase concentrates on enhancing and refining the initial framework. One of the critical agendas in the transformation plan involves the development of a culture of academic excellence. It is anticipated that this agenda can help to foster a world class higher education in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2011).

In relation to the transformation plan of higher education in Malaysia, the public universities have been categorised into three categories: research, comprehensive and focused universities. As shown in Table 1, the Malaysian public universities comprises five research universities, four comprehensive universities and eleven focused universities.

Table 1: The Three Categories of Malaysian Public Universities

Category	Main Characteristics	No of Universities
Research	Research based education	5
Comprehensive	Offers multiple field of studies	4
Focused	Specialise in a particular field of studies such as engineering, technical, management, education and defence.	11
Total number of Public University		20

The categorisation of the public universities have several implications. First, according to the transformational plan, the categorisation of the public universities gives more focus for the university to grow within a specific niche that contributes to maintaining its competitive advantage globally. Secondly, the categorisation is also an attempt to differentiate between pure research university and pure teaching university (Tjeldvoll 2011), with the aim to have a 'world class' quality of teaching and research respectively. However, there have yet to be a clear demarcation between the two as all of the universities perform these aspects at different degrees. Thirdly, the roles of academics are also affected by these categorisation, in which the research status universities put a higher emphasis on scholarly work as compared to teaching status universities (Maimunah & Roziah 2008).

#### 4.0 THE ACADEMIC CAREER IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, the academic career encompasses of six levels ranging from the tutor, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, professor and the most recently introduced is the distinguished professor, which is positioned at the top ranking. The professors are further categorised into three levels that are from the Professor Grade C, Professor Grade B and then Professor Grade A. The three core responsibilities of the academics are teaching, research and service. However, the involvement of academics in these three aspects vary depending many factors, such as the types of the universities, academic leadership appointment, seniority, and academic specialisation (Maimunah&RoZIAH 2008).

It is important to note that the ways in which academics perform the three core responsibilities are also shaped by the critical agendas imposed by the Malaysian higher education policies, thus this contributes to the uniqueness of the identities of Malaysian academics. One of the critical agenda of the National Higher Education Action Plan 2011-2015 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2011) is to cultivate a culture of academic excellence leading to the achievement of a world class higher education. In relation to this, a systematic approach to enhance the quality of academics has been developed (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2011). As shown in Figure 1, this framework consists of three interrelated components: enhancing the academic personality, the academic profession and finally the academic ecosystem. Each component has its on emphasis, as stated in Figure 1.

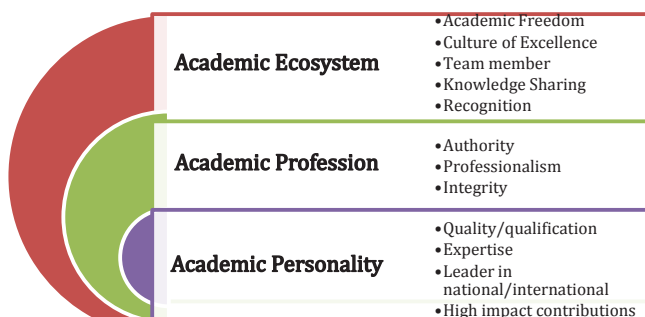


Figure 1: Framework to Cultivate the Culture of Academic Excellence

With respect to the promotion procedures in academic career, there are two forms of promotion procedures. One is carried out within the individual university and the second is implemented centrally at the Ministry of Higher Education. The promotion exercise for the career



path of a tutor, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and a professor is usually done within the individual university. While the promotion exercise for the distinguished professor is done centrally at the Ministry of Higher Education. The promotion procedure for the associate professor and professor usually requires an external evaluator who has a higher ranking than the position applied by an academic. Although the procedures tend to vary from one university to another, the promotion procedures are generally based on five criteria, which are teaching and supervision, research and innovation, consultation, publication, and services to the society and university. Further, the weightage for each category ranges from 10 to 50 percent and it varies depending on the level of promotion applied. Normally, the promotion for a senior lecturer requires more weightage on teaching and supervision, whilst the promotion for a associate professor requires more weightage on research and publication as well as consultation. This indicates that teaching and supervision is somehow less important as one moves towards a higher position in the academic career.

The promotion for the professor and distinguished professor are determined by a standard guideline developed by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia with some degrees of flexibility given to the individual institution. The development of this guideline is viewed important because it provides a transparent, fair and consistent promotion procedure to ensure the integrity and credibility of the Malaysian professors (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012). According to the guidelines, there are two pathways for the promotion of a professor: the normal pathway which follows the usual hierarchy (senior lecturer, next associate professor and finally a professor), while the special pathway that allows a senior lecturer to be promoted to a professor, bypassing the associate professor). Unlike the promotion procedure for the professor, the promotion procedure of the distinguished professor are done by a body of panelists specially appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education. Since this position is the apex of an academic career, the selection of academics for this position has to be carefully carried out to ensure the right person is selected. In addition, only Grade A professor is eligible to apply for the promotion to a distinguished professor.

The next section presents a discussion on the distribution of professors and the promotion guidelines for the professor and distinguished professors, considering that the ultimate goal of academics is to achieve this position in their career path.

## 5.0 THE PROFESSORS AND DISTINGUISHED PROFESSORS IN MALAYSIA

Table 2 shows the distribution of local professors across the public universities in 2010. As shown in Table 2, there were approximately 1500 local professors and three distinguished professors in the public universities in 2010. For the professors, the majority of the professors were located at the research universities(70.6 percent), the comprehensive universities(15.6percent) and the focused universities (13.8percent). Further, two professors from the research universities and only one professor from the comprehensive universities were promoted to distinguished professors. All the three distinguished professors are from public universities that have comparatively long historical development in Malaysia. These figures indicate that comparatively, the majority of the professors are located at the more established universities particularly the research universities as compared to the newly established universities, such as the focused universities.

Table 2: The Distribution of Professors and Distinguished Professors in Malaysian Public Universities as of 2010

	Types of Universities	No of Professors	%	Distinguished Professors
	<b>Research Universities</b>			
1	<i>Universiti Malaya</i>	295	<b>70.6</b>	<b>1</b>
2	<i>Universiti Sains Malaysia</i>	163		-
3	<i>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia</i>	257		<b>1</b>
4	<i>Universiti Putra Malaysia</i>	168		-
5	<i>Universiti Teknologi Malaysia</i>	156		-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1039</b>		<b>2</b>
	<b>Comprehensive universities</b>			
1	<i>Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia</i>	60	<b>15.6</b>	<b>1</b>
2	<i>Universiti Malaysia Sarawak</i>	35		-
3	<i>Universiti Malaysia Sabah</i>	24		-
4	<i>Universiti Teknologi Mara</i>	111		-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>230</b>		<b>1</b>
	<b>Focused Universities</b>			
1	<i>Universiti Utara Malaysia</i>	23	<b>13.8</b>	-
2	<i>Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris</i>	34		-
3	<i>Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia</i>	23		-
4	<i>Universiti Malaysia Terengganu</i>	15		-
5	<i>Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia</i>	26		-
6	<i>Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka</i>	17		-
7	<i>Universiti Malaysia Pahang</i>	21		-
8	<i>Universiti Malaysia Perlis</i>	15		-
9	<i>Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia</i>	8		-
10	<i>Universiti Malaysia Kelantan</i>	13		-
11	<i>Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia</i>	8		-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>203</b>		<b>0</b>
	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1472</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3</b>



Being positioned as among the highest hierarchy in the academic profession, the professors are considered as the leaders in the academic world and they contribute to the prestige of a university. The professors are also viewed as the expert human capital and they are at the highest position to contribute to their nation intellect (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012).

The profile of a professor has been determined in the guidelines developed by the Ministry of Higher Education(2012). The promotion guideline outlines five main features of a professor that are:

- Productivity in the field of academic, especially in publication and research within their areas of expertise;
- Has received recognition and praise from peer group both at national and international levels;
- Has established a breadth and depth national and international networking among their peer group;
- Has excellent performance in academic leadership as well as academic management leadership; and
- Has demonstrated high level of collegiality in the academic community.

To enhance the quality of academics and to acknowledge the important role of academics in the development of the nation, a new position in the academic career has been created: the distinguished professor. The first appointment for this position was awarded in 2010 to three professors: two from research universities and one from a comprehensive university (as shown in Table 1). Specifically, the profile of distinguished professor has been outlined in the promotion guide (Ministry of Higher Education 2012) as follows:

- Proven academic authority with extraordinary attributes and distinctiveness;
- Proven scholarship based on research activities and contributions characterised by significant academic-based advocacy, which extends across his/her specialisation and gives impact to the community;
- Proven intellect based on thoughtful thinking and strategic plan of action pertaining to issues of mankind and that relate to efforts to overcome challenges faced by the nation and the country, both internal and outside the country; and
- Receive praise and recognitions in the form of prestigious awards at international level.

It is evident that the position of a distinguished professor exhibits, leadership, authority and scholarship both at the national as well as the international levels. To be promoted to a distinguished professor, applicants need to prove to the committee that they have achieved all the four features mentioned above. They must prove that their research, publications give impact to the community and contribute to the building of the nation, hence, to date, there are very few professors who have been promoted to this level. According to Mohamed Khaled, the Minister of Higher Education Malaysia (2011),

*a distinguished professor is an icon owned by the nation and his/her expertise need to be shared together ... a distinguished professor should be the source of inspiration for the young academics and students ... it is not a question of the number of research publication he/she produces, what is most important is how his/her knowledge and intellect is translated to influence the framework, vision and development of the nation.[translation] (pp. 3-5).*

## **6.0 THE PROMOTION CRITERIA FOR PROFESSORS AND DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR**

The identities of professors and distinguished professors are largely shaped by the promotion guidelines developed by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE 2012). The guidelines serves as a benchmark to safeguard the image and credibility of the appointed professors and distinguished professors. It specifically outlines the process, procedures, mechanism and criteria for the promotion for professors and distinguished professors, thus it serves as a source of reference for both academics in the public and private universities.

Based on the guideline, scholarship is considered as the main quality of a professor and the distinguished professor. In this regard, scholarship is referred to the credibility and esteem recognition of the professor both in the national and international contexts. For a sustainable culture of scholarship, a professor is expected to

- contribute continuously in their field of specialisation;
- continuously exhibit scholarship through significant activities and contributions across their field of specialisation and give impact to the society in general; and
- demonstrate intellect through rational thinking and strategic plan of action related to human issues.

In addition, two main components of scholarship are outlined in the guidelines. They are values (ethical, integrity, disciplined

and innovative);and activities (teaching supervision, research and innovation, conference, publication, consultation, leadership and collegiality, networking, community service and prestige).

The criteria for the promotion of a professor is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Criteria and Weightage for the Promotion of Professor in Malaysia

	Criteria	Weightage
1	<b>Research and Publication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead 5 research projects worth RM150,000</li> <li>• Have 20 publications, in which 20% published in ISI journals as the main author</li> <li>• 2 writings of chapter in a book</li> <li>• number of citations as set up by the university</li> </ul>	30-40
2	<b>Teaching and Supervision</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce at least 1 Phd or 2 Masters student(s) (core supervisor)</li> <li>• Conduct 60 credit teaching and receive good teaching evaluation</li> </ul>	30-40
3	<b>Academic Recognition and Leadership</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key note speaker for 2 conferences international/national, or</li> <li>• Editor for peer reviewed journal, or</li> <li>• Reviewer for indexed journal (5 articles) or</li> <li>• Reviewer for manuscript or (2)</li> <li>• External examiner for a promotion of Assoc Prof (2)</li> </ul>	10-20
4	<b>Service to the university and community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair member of a Committee - national and international context</li> </ul>	5-15
5	<b>Consultation /industry partnership/clinical</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 services in area of specialisation</li> </ul>	5-15

As shown in Table 3, there are five criteria for the promotion of a professor, which include research and publication, teaching and consultation, academic recognition and leadership, service to the university and community and consultation or industry partnership or clinical. To eligible for the application of the promotion, an academic needs to achieve at least a total of 80 percent, all of the five criteria need to be evident and needs to achieve a minimum of 30 percent for two important criteria: research and publication, and teaching and supervision. Further, the detailed requirement for each criteria is different depending on the level of professor (Professor Grade C, B or A) applied by the academic, and the specific field of the specialisation of the academic (science and technology, social sciences and humanities or clinical).

The criteria for the promotion of distinguished professor is outlined in Table 4 below.

Table 4: The Criteria for the Promotion of Distinguished Professor

A	<b>Recognition and Praise</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Received various prestigious awards at national and international levels</li><li>• Appreciation of academic and professional contributions in the forms of academic scholarship</li></ul>
B	<b>High Impact Research/ Publication/Innovation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Significant role in development and formulating framework at the national and international context</li><li>• Produce research/publication and innovation</li><li>• Develop idea/subtheory/new concept</li></ul>
C	<b>Academic Authority/Scholarship</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advisor/Expert point of reference at the national and international level</li></ul>
D	<b>Community Service</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Initiate ideas for national social and economic development</li></ul>
E	<b>Collegiality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Receive acceptance and acknowledgement as the nation prestigious intellect</li></ul>

As indicated in Table 4, there are five criteria for the promotion of a distinguished professor which are identified as recognition and praise, high impact research, publication and innovation, academic authority and scholarship, contribution to community service and collegiality. Due to its prestigious position, the promotion process will be done by a special committee located at the Ministry of Higher Education. This is to ensure that a very careful screening is conducted before awarding the position.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

This paper documents the academic career in Malaysian higher education context. It focuses on the roles of a professor and distinguished professor as outlined by the promotion guidelines developed by the Ministry of Higher Education. It is evident that the profile of Malaysian professors is shaped by not only the global trends in higher education, but also the agenda of the transformation of higher education to develop Malaysia as the hub of higher education within the Asia Pacific region. As shown in the promotion criteria, academics are expected to participate in international landscape of higher education and gain international recognition through research and publication. In this regard, although teaching and supervision considered as an important criteria, more emphasis is given to research and publication. This indicates that as academic climbs the ladder of its career, teaching is becoming less important. Further, the concepts of academic leadership, scholarship and intellect are becoming common vocabularies in the world of the professor. However, as evident in the literature, these concepts are problematic as they have diverse interpretations. As such, there are rooms for further research in this area. It is also interesting to note that consultation receive relatively lesser weightage than research and publication. This practice is in contrast with the global trend that

expects universities to generate their own income due to the decreasing dependence on public funds.

Aiming to cultivate the culture of academic excellence in Malaysia, a prestige position has been created in the Malaysian academic career, that is the distinguished professor. This action indicates the influence of the national agenda upon academic career in Malaysia. Considering that this position has just been recently created in 2010, and there have been only three academics awarded this position so far, it is timely to investigate the ways in which these academics achieve this position. It is anticipated that an investigation of the three distinguished professors provides valuable insights and information for the young academics to strive for excellence in their profession. Hence, indirectly it contributes to the achievement of the agenda of the national higher education transformation to cultivate the culture of academic excellence.

Finally, this paper serves as a preamble for a research project that investigates the experience, beliefs and aspirations of the three distinguished professors as Malaysian academics that qualify them to carry the prestigious position in Malaysian academic profession, the distinguished professors. This project is funded by the Academy of Leadership in Higher Education (AKEPT), the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.

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